DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 036 CG 014 277

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TITLE	The Diagnosis and Treatment of Underachievement.
INSTITUTION	B'nai B'rith, Washington, D.C. Career and Counseling Services.
PUB DATE	Dec 79
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the B'nai B'rith Career and Counseling Services Professional Staff Conference (May 1979).
AVAILABLE FROM	B'nai B'rith Career and Counseling Services, 1640 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20036.
JOURNAL CIT	Counselor's Information Service; v34 n4 Suppl 1 Dec 1979
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; Educational Counseling; *Educational Diagnosis; Elementary Secondary Education; Jews; *Motivation; *Psychological Characteristics; *Psychopathology; State of the Art Reviews; Student Problems; *Underachievement

ABSTRACT

In American culture, and particularly among upwardly mobile Jews, educational achievement is perceived to be of the highest importance. Much of the research into the nature of underachievement deals primarily with the identification of underachievers as manifesting a host of pathological characteristics such as poor peer relationships, negative and materialistic attitudes, social inadequacy, bad study habits, low self-concept, and poor family relationships. Within the last decade, a series of studies have been conducted at the Illinois Institute of Technology, based on the theoretical assumption that underachievement is a symptom which relates to psychopathology, and similar symptoms can occur within any pathology. Therefore, underachievement is viewed as securing a different function depending on the pathology where it is formed. This particular research has identified three distinct pathologies related to underachievement: (1) neurosis; (2) the non-achievement syndrome (NAS); and (3) the adolescent reaction. (Author/HLM)

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Subscription $14.00 per year

Volume 34, Number 4 Supplement 1 December 1979

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THE DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT

by

Michael Goodstein, Ph.D.*

Introduction

Underachievement is more than an educational problem. A gifted pianist may never perform up to the expectations of his mentors, a highly touted rookie professional athlete may sit on the bench most of his career, and a talented writer may produce only one good piece of work. However, as virtually all of the psychological research on underachievement has focused on educational underachievement, and since this is the area of underachievement a counselor at B'nai B'rith Career and Counseling Services is likely to see, this paper will be restricted to the academic variety.

In our culture, and particularly among upwardly mobile Jews, educational achievement is perceived to be of the highest importance. Children who are believed to be bright and who consistently perform poorly in school become a source of grave concern and anxiety. Not only do parents become chronically upset but the relationship between parent and child becomes strained, particularly around those times of year when report cards arrive. Parents have attempted any number of solutions which range from talks with teachers, rewards or punishments related to homework, and threats of military school and lying on an analyst's couch, (sometimes the parents, sometimes the child, and sometimes all concerned). Very quickly both parents and professionals discover that underachievement is a persistent trait that doesn't readily disappear. In fact, studies of the psychological treatment of underachievement have reported consistently poor results (Mandell, Roth and Berenbaum, 1968). However, a series of research studies done at the Illinois Institute of Technology involving the differential diagnosis and treatment of underachievement has proven to be the most

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* This paper was presented at the B'nai B'rith Career and Counseling Services Professional Staff Conference, May 1979. Dr. Goodstein is Regional Director, B'nai B'rith Career and Counseling Services, Chicago, Illinois.

successful thus far. Some of this work and its implications will be cited later in this paper.

Research

Research into the nature of underachievement has dealt with a number of different aspects. This section is intended as a sample of some of the more important studies that identify some common characteristics of underachievers. One researcher (Barrett, 1957) discovered that underachievers relate significantly less to their peers and are generally less persistent in investigating the relationship between underachievement and perceived parental attitudes. Lee (1976) found that high achievers perceived their parents more favorably than low achievers. Low achievers felt more rejection and neglect, fewer symbolic rewards, and more symbolic punishment than high achievers. Malloy (1954) investigated the relationship between stimulation toward academic success with underachievers and with achievers. He found that the parents of underachievers tend to shield their children from criticism and to demand less of the child in the early years and more in the later years. This establishes a manipulative relationship resulting in immaturity.

The attitude system of the underachiever has been shown to be generally negative and materialistic. He/she may have a negative attitude toward school, achievement, and parents (Barrett, 1957). They value such concepts as keeping up with the Joneses and making money, as opposed to achievers, who value more personal qualities such as self-expression, independence, self-discipline, and making one's own decisions (Rezler, 1960). In general, underachievers feel socially inadequate, a situation which leads to the adoption of those values which prevent them from utilizing their potential (Malloy, 1954). They have difficulty in working toward distant goals and manifest poorly functioning cognitive powers, a correlation which severely affects their persistence (Rezler, 1960).

Behaviorally, Diener (1960) found several significant differences between achievers and underachievers. He discovered that underachievers have poor study habits, take little part in family intercourse, engage in social activities more than the achievers, but they are less accepted by their peer group, date less, and are less popular.

Several researchers have sought to identify the relationship between self-concept and underachievement. Shaw and Alves (1963) determined that among bright male students, achievers could be differentiated significantly from underachievers in that the underachievers selected words on an adjective check list more characteristic of a negative self-concept than did the achievers. Bruck and Bodwin (1962) took scores from thirty high school students with learning difficulty and thirty additional high school students recognized as underachievers by virtue of grade point average. Scores on the self-concept scale were derived from the Machover Draw-A-Person Test and the scores were correlated with the presence or absence of underachievement. A correlation of .6 resulted which the authors report as indicating a significant relationship between negative self-concept on the instrument utilized and the presence of scholastic underachievement.

Ziv (1977) found that achievers had higher self-concepts than average IQ underachievers and Thiel (1978), using a small sample of these gifted male underachievers, found these children to have a weak self-concept.

Fink (1962) undertook a large-scale study relating self-concept to underachievement. His subjects were selected from a freshman high school class with academic achievement determined by grade point average. The grade point average determination was made on all marks in the ninth grade for freshmen who achieved scores between 90 and 110 on the California Test of Mental Maturity. The subjects whose grade point average fell below the median were classified as underachievers. Pairs of achievers and underachievers thus formed were matched for both sex and I.Q. Judgments of self-concept were made utilizing information in general use by school psychologists and clinicians. The data included the California Psychological Inventory, Bender-Gestalt, the Draw-A-Person Test, a personal data sheet, and a brief essay written by the subject. Three judges were required to make an evaluation as to the adequacy of the self-concept as represented in the psychological data presented. Each judge worked alone and no attempt was made to define adequate self-concept for the judges. All three judges found significance at the .01 level for self-concept as related to academic achievement in boys. Further, all judges found little statistical significance in the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement in girls.

Another area of exploration with underachievers has been in family relationships. Morrow and Wilson (1961) investigated the family relations of bright, high achieving and underachieving high school boys. The study was designed to explore various aspects of family relations that seemed related to student achievement. These researchers found that parents of high achievers have been found to give their children more praise and approval, to show more interest and understanding, to be closer to their children, and to make their children feel a sense of belonging and identification with the parents. On the other hand, parents of underachievers were reported to be more domineering, restrictive, and to use both frequent and more severe punishment. Parents of underachievers typically either baby their children or push them excessively. Finally, homes of underachievers are reported to exhibit more tension and more parental disagreement.

Iscoe (1964) provides an interesting description of the problem of the bright underachieving child. He describes the underachieving child as being in a situation similar to the "double bind" situation of the schizophrenic. In this setting a child who is already acknowledged as being bright is reassured constantly and reinforced by teachers and parents with statements such as "if you would only try" or "you could do it if you set your mind to it." The child accepts these verbalizations and thus reinforces the view of himself as a failure. The child is in a situation in which he is condemned for not doing better or trying harder since everyone knows he could. If on the other hand the child gets to work, tries harder and actually manages to achieve, characteristically the response is "we knew you could do it all the time." If the child succeeds he has to admit that he was failing to produce all the other times, and if he doesn't admit it, they point it out anyway. Iscoe doesn't believe that this explanation covers the full range of academic underachievement, but it does point out a very logical dilemma that frequently besets the bright underachieving child.

An interesting study done by Peppin (1963) investigated the relationship between the academic achievement of a child relative to both his own potential and the parent's ability to understand the child. Included in his research design were expressions of the parents' feelings about the child and some measures of self-evaluation. Peppin presented a theory that the parents' understanding and acceptance are crucial if a child is to achieve his potential. He hypothesized that a

child who achieved well relative to his own ability when compared with children who did not achieve, would have parents who have greater understanding and acceptance. Achievement in this study was measured by the California Achievement Test and predictions concerning parental behavior utilized the behavior rating scales. The results were in agreement with the general hypothesis that the parent-child relationship was positively related to the ability of the child.

Powell and Jourand (1963) conducted a study in which they used objective measures of immaturity with underachieving college students. Twenty male and twenty female underachievers were compared with similar numbers of achieving students on measures of security and self-disclosure to parents and friends. There were essentially no differences in mean scores but in the achieving groups, there were significant correlations between disclosures to peers and security. In the underachieving groups, significant correlations were found between disclosure to parents and security. These findings were presented as clear evidence to support the conception that underachievers are overly dependent on their parents. It is characteristic as children move through adolescence toward adulthood that peer groups should become more significant in the life of the adolescent. This study points out that the underachieving college student is consistently more dependent on his parents than his achieving counterpart.

A recent study by Dixon (1977) sought to determine the relationship between personality variable to achievement level: inner-other direction, adult-peer orientation, and women's role orientation. Dixon found that inner-directed girls had higher mathematical achievement test scores than other-directed girls. The measure of adult-peer orientation demonstrated no significant relationship to achievement level. However, girls with a more liberal women's role orientation demonstrated higher achievement levels than those with a more traditional view.

Psychodynamics

As can be observed from most of the previously cited research studies, they deal primarily with the identification of underachievers as manifesting a host of pathological characteristics. The net effect is to indicate that underachievement is related to psychopathology. However, logic would indicate that a behavioral symptom such as underachievement should have several pathological determinants. For example, the neurotic in the throes of a family crisis would be expected to underachieve as would a borderline schizophrenic fighting to maintain contact with reality. Within the last decade a series of studies were conducted at Illinois Institute of Technology which were designed to identify the various pathologies related to underachievement, and to develop treatment approaches to effect changes not only in achievement but in the psychopathologies themselves. The theoretical view of these researchers (Roth, Berenbaum, and Hershenson, 1967) is that underachievement is a symptom which is related to psychopathology and similar symptoms can occur within any pathology. Therefore, underachievement is viewed as serving a different function depending on the pathology where it is found. In the research and clinical activity with underachievers at Illinois Institute of Technology, three distinct pathologies have been identified as relating to underachievement: neurosis, the non-achievement syndrome, and the adolescent reaction. This section will be a description of the psychodynamics and characteristics of these pathological groups as they relate to underachievement.

Descriptions of neurosis and all the specific varieties are abundant in the literature so that only the briefest account will be presented here. The common symptomatology found among most of the neuroses include anxiety, poor self-concept, difficulty with interpersonal relations (especially authority figures), dependency feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, rigidity, guilt, and problems concerning the recognition and acceptance of feelings. Owing to unresolved developmental difficulties, his or her relationship to authority figures is a predominant theme in life, both in psychotherapy as well as outside. This relationship with authority is characterized as mixed with both fear and dependency resulting in the formation of hostile-dependent relationships.

There are several important aspects of the neurotic underachiever as compared to the non-achievement syndrome and adolescent reaction. In general terms the underachieving neurotic is so preoccupied with guilt, anxiety, and maintaining a relationship with the important people in his/her life (primarily with parents) that the amount of available energy directed toward school work becomes vastly diminished. However, there are some neurotics, primarily the obsessive-compulsive, who are capable of channeling their anxiety into academics so that some compulsives may in fact be over-achievers. When anxiety becomes overwhelming and sublimation can no longer be employed as a defense, anxiety becomes too much to handle and achievement may begin to suffer.

The psychoanalysts and the self-theorists view neurosis from a somewhat different perspective. The psychoanalytic perspective of the underachieving neurotic male would generally view him in Oedipal terms. His underachievement would be designed to "kill" his father, an interpretation which becomes more understandable in light of an upwardly-mobile father who invests so much concern for his son's achievement. Female underachievement can be viewed either as an act of defiance toward the mother or as a manipulative action to gain the caring and concern of the father. The self-theorists would argue that the neurotic feels to be of low self-esteem so that high achievement doesn't fit into his self-concept. He, therefore, must insure that the quality of his work matches his low self-concept.

The non-achievement-syndrome (NAS) is another category of underachiever identified by Roth and Meyersburg (1963). The major characteristic of the NAS individual is the maladaptive behavior which prevents him from any degree of success in life. Unlike the neurotic he appears to be functioning well in most areas of his life except one: achievement. He is thought to be fixated at the pre-adolescent latency stage of development (approximately ten to twelve years of age).

In an interview situation the NAS appears to be relatively non-anxious and with sufficient ego strength. A mild underlying depression can usually be detected along with a never ending series of excuses about the reasons for his poor academic performance. The excuses run the gamut from inability to concentrate, teachers don't like him, freezing on tests (he freezes because he doesn't know the answers) to no place to study. If the interviewer presses any of these responses, he may shift to another line of excuses but he will not admit

that he doesn't do well because he doesn't study enough. He cannot accept the responsibility for his plight but must attribute it to circumstances beyond his control. He believes that his poor academic performance is merely an unfortunate accident and he is the victim of circumstances.

Roth and Meyersburg (1963) believe that the underachievement of the NAS serves a specific function related to the level of fixation-preadolescent latency. They believe that the underachievement of the NAS is utilized in order to avoid the anxiety inherent in the next stage of development, adolescence. The self-concept is gradually being integrated in this period. As it is emerging, the issues of independence will become dominant. With these developmental principles in mind the NAS uses underachievement as his vehicle to remain dependent and to thereby avoid the struggle of independence in the next stage of development. In this view underachievement is perceived to be a choice in which the individual elects poor academic performance to remain at a particular level of psychological development and to make the responsibility for his life shouldered by others, usually the parents. Later in life this responsibility may be displaced to a spouse or anybody else willing to take on this role.

The adolescent reaction is a third type of underachiever composed of individuals both chronologically adolescent and older who have become fixated at the adolescent level of psychological development. The psychological issues faced by the adolescent are well documented. There is a growing awareness of self and the way one operates in the world which some authors have aptly termed the struggle for identity. There is the matter of relationships with the opposit sex, an issue which provokes a great deal of anxiety for most teen-agers. Along with the struggle for identity is the desire, and the concommitant fears, to seek out a degree of independence. It is out of this desire for independence that a good deal of conflict with parents has its source. Familiar themes concern dating rules and regulations, driving the family car, friends, clothes, and personal habits. They now seek to define themselves in ways that often upset the parents. What previously may have been a "good" boy or girl is now a person who is often intolerable. Rebellion often becomes the order of the day.

The adolescent reaction is caught up with rebellious behavior and asserting independence. Underachievement may become the vehicle by which they assert their independence. Not only do they defy the expectations of their parents in a very important area of life, they also reassure themselves that they are really doing "their thing" and, as such, are gaining the independence they think they want. However, the adolescent reaction doesn't understand that rebellion and dependency are intimately connected. They aren't making decisions based on their own evaluated conceptions, but rather they must rebel against the values of the parents or other authority figures. Pressures to do well in school are usually rampant in their life. Not only do the parents have such expectations, but it seems to them that virtually every adult has the same idea: "If you don't do well in school, you'll never amount to anything." The adolescent reaction is out to prove that academic success is not only unnecessary but may even be an evil of society.

It is important to mention the relationship between underachievement and learning disability. Underachievement, in the context of this paper, is being considered a motivational problem and not a perceptual problem. Therefore, an underachiever may or may not have a learning disability. Some people with a learning disability may in fact use this problem as an excuse for underachievement but the learning disability itself does not make for underachievement. Certainly the person who does have a learning disability which has not been properly diagnosed may look as if he is an underachiever when in fact his ability is being limited by factors not under his control.

Treatment

A theory of psychotherapeutic treatment designed to treat the three types of underachievers described above has been developed by Roth, et al. (1967). According to this theory, since each type of underachiever has its own developmental fixation point with its commensurate issues, personality structure, and relationship needs, then different therapies should have differing effectiveness with the same pathology. This comes out of the idea that people grow (more from stage to stage of maturation) through significant human interaction and different forms of psychotherapy provides different relationship needs. When these relationship needs are being fulfilled, therapeutic interaction occurs and the patient grows.

If it is true that a particular therapeutic system is most appropriate for each type of underachiever, then which system is best for each underachiever? The neurotic has been depicted as an individual with a typically punitive superego and weak ego system. If the Oedipal situation of the neurotic has not been resolved, then the individual still desires the love and protection of a parent. Thus, transference relationships are significant and must be developed for a significant human relationship to occur. Therefore, it is theorized that a psychoanalytic framework with its emphasis on transference, the Oedipus complex and the interplay of psychic forces is the therapeutic system most relevant and appropriate for the neurotic underachiever. By resolving the Oedipal crisis and providing improvement in ego strength the neurotic underachiever should be able to focus more energy on academic as well as other goals.

The NAS individual has been depicted as utilizing underachievement as a way of maintaining dependency. In this case, an intervention-oriented therapy focusing on behavior and confronting the individual with the kinds of manipulations he is using has been found to be extremely helpful in providing psychological growth and reducing the NAS dilemma. The appropriate intervention must focus on the issue of responsibility and demonstrate that the individual is choosing to underachieve and, therefore, it is under his control.

The adolescent reaction individual has been depicted as a disorder of the self system. This type of individual has successfully resolved the Oedipal situation and thereby attained normal ego and superego development. They do

not desire the kind of relationship sought by the neurotic nor do they require the kind of interventions appropriate for the NAS. The relationship needs from a therapist are minimal so that the issues of rebellion and the independence-dependence growth crisis be allowed to come to the foreground. A client-centered framework with concepts such as permissive atmosphere, reflection of feelings, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard is theorized to be the most appropriate for the adolescent reaction.

A significant number of the clients seen at BBCCS are in the category of underachiever, whether it be the academic variety, the person who feels he works at a job that has never been a challenge, or the individual who goes from job to job without even realizing his or her potential. As such, it is critical for the BBCCS counselor to recognize the psychodynamics of underachievement and to handle it appropriately. The underachiever can be helped only if his problem is recognized.

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